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# A Mass Movement for the Dalits? The VCK and party politics in TN

Written by Hugo Gorringer & D. Karthikeyan Published on 12 July 2014

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Speaking at a memorial to honour the memory of Dalits killed by casteist fanatics in Melavalavu last month, Thol. Thirumavalavan, the leader of the Viduthala Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) called for 'a mass movement' to protect the rights and dignity of Dalits in the state. A catalogue of brutal murders, rapes and mob attacks on Dalit homes over the past few years lends support to his demand. The mobilisation of Dalits during the 1990s resulted in changed attitudes and increased awareness amongst the most marginal sections of society. Dalits were no longer prepared to accept everyday indignities at tea-shops or village wells, they answered back, demanded a say in village affairs and sought out employment opportunities that enabled them to escape dependence. The increased profile of Dalit politics, however, has resulted in a backlash from the intermediate castes who are socially, economically and politically dominant in the state. In the past three to four years we have witnessed a consolidation of Backward Caste forces.



In conferences, meetings and party manifestoes, these groups now demand the repeal of the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act – which they claim is being abused by Dalits; they

call on members to avoid cross-caste marriages with a particularly vehement reaction to marriages involving Dalits; and they seek to mobilise communities on a caste basis and demand representation and resources on that basis. Party leaders like Kaduvetti J. Guru, M.L.A., of the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) have openly condemned Vanniyar-Dalit marriages in speeches and we can understand the rise on reports of 'honour crimes' against this backdrop. For all the critiques of the law by such groups, furthermore, there is little evidence that Dalits in the state can rely on the protection of state authorities. It is still a struggle to file cases, and pressure to reach a compromise agreement that does not result in a trial. In other cases, it seems, the authorities are actively opposed to Dalit assertion: the firing on unarmed Dalits at a rally in Paramakudi in 2011 was officially sanctioned, and police have recently arrested several Dalit youth from Natham colony – one of three colonies ransacked and burned by a caste mob in 2012 – on suspicion of naxalite involvement.

Thirumavalavan has condemned these arrests as politically motivated, but regardless of the rights and wrongs of this case, state inaction towards the perpetrators of caste violence and a growing sense that their voices are not heard is precisely what creates the conditions for radicalisation. The need for a grass-roots movement that can rally Dalits in towns and villages and give them the means to contest caste domination and monitor state authorities, thus, is absolutely clear. We do not have any argument with Thirumavalavan's prescription, but we are nonetheless surprised by it. The VCK is the largest Dalit party in the state. It emerged – as the Dalit Panther Iyyakkam (movement) - in the early 1990s and confronted forms of caste domination head on. It challenged practices of untouchability in the streets, fought back against caste violence and raised awareness and movement outposts in innumerable villages across Tamil Nadu. In urban estates and remote villages alike the flag or board of the movement served as a rallying point and as a deterrent to anti-Dalit forces. Both the DPI and other movements such as Puthiya Tamilagam and the Dalit Liberation Movement created an uprising that challenged taken-for-granted ways of doing things and empowered ordinary Dalits to fight back, question caste norms and speak out for themselves. The DPI, in other words, was the mass movement that Thirumavalavan is calling for! Given that the DPI transformed itself into the VCK and claims to have grown exponentially as a party, however, we need to ask some searching questions about Dalit politics.

Implied in the call for such a movement is an acknowledgement that the VCK no longer acts as a mass movement. Our research highlights the truth of this: for all the high profile attached to VCK leaders, the infrastructure of the party remains threadbare. Ward level meetings are rarely held, there is a widespread antipathy towards a culture of compromise that has emerged within the party and there is an urgent need for the party to develop its secondary leaders. In 2011, for instance, caste Hindus ransacked the Dalit hamlet in Parali Puthur. Whilst VCK cadre were amongst the first on the scene and offered support and sustenance to the terrified villagers, there is a widespread belief that 'the VCK did nothing'. The reason for this is that Thirumavalavan did not visit the spot and, in his absence, media coverage and protests lacked urgency.

Time and again atrocities are met with local protests, but they are neither effective nor sustained. On the one hand it is important to note that the VCK are the only party to hold such protests, that Thirumavalavan cannot be everywhere at once and that the party lacks resources compared to other organisations. Simultaneously, however, it is clear that more

could (and perhaps should) have been done to create a tier of respected and well known secondary leaders who could lead on such protests and act as a bridge between the grassroots and the leader. Local level Dalits point towards the emphasis on Tamil nationalism, the need to appeal to voters from all castes, and the socio-political networks between VCK leaders and politicians from other parties as reasons for the stagnation of the movement and the rise in compromises.

In some ways, the VCK predicament mirrors that of the BSP. Both are licking their wounds after a poll debacle and both seem to have concluded that they need to strengthen their core support base: for the BSP, this means re-establishing their clout among Dalits as a priority and a critical reflection on the durability of the *sarvajan* strategy. Where the BSP reached out to Brahmins and other castes, however, the VCK sought to prioritise Tamil Nationalism and asserted that Dalit liberation was entwined within the liberation of Tamil(s). Whilst Tamil nationalism was seen as a means to attract voters from other castes and to grow beyond the Dalit category, the very concept of Tamilness has been problematic. Just as the non-Dravidian and non-Brahmin movements obscured caste concerns and failed to represent the aspirations of the members who fell under the category, the category of Tamil has been subject to critical scrutiny.

The establishment of the Pattali Makkal Katchi in the 1980s and the emergence of Dalit movements in the early 1990s were indicative of the failings of Dravidian politics. Whilst the rhetorical insistence that Dalits are also Tamils is significant, the meaning of that assertion is subject to question by persistent caste atrocities. Despite the torching of nearly 300 Dalit homes in Dharmapuri following a cross-caste marriage between two 'Tamils', so called crusaders of Tamil nationalism like Vaiko joined hands with the PMK which was behind all the violence in the BJP coalition. What conceptual meaning does Tamil Nationalism have in terms of Dalit emancipation here? During all these years of Tamil Nationalism and its rhetoric what structural changes has it brought about in the everyday lives of Dalits, apart from recruiting them as foot soldiers for their narrow political ends?

Writing about trends across India Ghanshyam Shah noted that there was an 'impasse' in Dalit politics. His analysis was based mostly on experiences in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, but it would seem that this applied equally to the situation in Tamil Nadu. The VCK (and other Dalit outfits) are caught in a double bind: to win elections and press for change within political institutions they need to reach out beyond the Dalit category and forge alliances with other parties and groups. In so doing, however, they can grow apart from and end up alienating their core constituency. Some Dalit intellectuals, indeed, feel that the VCK has become so detached from Dalits at the local level that they can no longer capture the enthusiasm and commitment that marked their movement phase. It is certainly true that the party is as tarred by accusations of compromise and corruption now as any of the other political players in the state. Despite this, however, it would not be impossible for the VCK to reinvent itself once more. The failure to win any seats in the past two elections may, in this sense, prove to be a blessing rather than a curse.

Freed from his responsibilities as an MP, Thirumavalavan has the time to devote to campaigning and organisation building with the state. The party would, furthermore, not be building from scratch. Although many local units exist more in name than practice, the party has a reach and presence across much of the state that would be the envy of most organisations. The key question, thus, may not be whether they can change their approach, but whether they really want to. Creating a mass movement for Dalits would mean a return

to the days of political marginalisation, of endless meetings and of an emphasis on Dalit rather than Tamil issues. It would also mean that the party would need to buck the trend in Tamil Nadu for parties to revolve around the central leader and for the VCK to have the courage to invest more power and responsibility in secondary leaders. This task will not be easy: divisions within the party make Thirumavalavan the unifying figure as well as the leader, and other parties will use any means available to create and exploit divisions and woo rising leaders away. The path to an egalitarian society, as Thirumavalavan has stated repeatedly, will be neither smooth nor trouble free. The choice before the VCK at present is whether to choose that path, or to stick to the path of parliamentary compromise that bring recognition and rewards for a few whilst leaving the majority of Dalits at the margins.

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*Picture courtesy: **Thirumavalavan stills.***